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ABSTRACT

Various approaches to language assessment of the preschool child are reviewed, and the use of language sample analysis as part of a language assessment package is considered. The pros and cons of such approaches as checklists, screening tests, and language sample analysis are considered. Procedures for administering the language sample analysis portion of the Bare Essentials in Assessing Really Little Kids are described. It is concluded that the language sample analysis within the natural environment provides the broadest view of language functioning of young children. (SBH)

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Language Assessment of the Preschool Child with Language Delay

by

M. Suzanne Hasenstab

Introduction

Emerging language and the use of speech has traditionally been an important milestone in the development of the young child. When a child fails to produce the appropriate awaited utterances, concern arises on the part of parents and professionals regarding the evident delay. The presence of a delay in language and speech development, regardless of causative factors, has long concerned researchers in child development (Gesell, 1940, 1956; Doll 1966). Stages in the developmental process were noted and normal age ranges for production and understanding were determined. Cognitivist theory (Piaget, 1926, 1952; Vygotsky, 1962) emphasized the dimension of a relationship between language and a child's growing understanding of the world. Within the past twenty years, new insight through the area of psycholinguistics (Chomsky, 1957, 1965; McNeil, 1970; Chomsky & Halle, 1968; Berko, 1958) has provided the awareness that language development is more than a milestone or series of stages that a child passes through at various ages, Language and speech development is now viewed. The work of Brown, 1973; Brown and Bellugi, 1964; Bloom, 1970, Bloom and Lahey, 1978; and Menyuk, 1969, for example, indicates that children acquire systematic and predictable rules for generating words, phrases and sentences.

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Language Evaluation Approaches

Based on such evidence it should be possible then to determine not only if a child does demonstrate a language delay, regardless of cause, but to ascertain the extent and area of language affected.

Various approaches in language assessment exist. The checklist (Anderson, 1965, Mecham, 1958, 1971; Bzoch and League, 1970) presents items relating to language behavior in a developmental order which the examiner observes and then uses to determine the child's functioning level. A major drawback to this approach is that the behaviors are general and that various language components are not differentiated. Language developmental or intellectual assessment of young children (McCarthy, 1974; Wechsler, 1967; Bayley, 1969) but items in these measures reflect a part of the child's overall intellectual or developmental level and not language ability per se.

Various screening instruments are also in use (Bankson, 1977; Zimmerman, 1969; Sheridan, 1976; Vane, 1975). These tests may be effective in determining if a delay is present but their purpose is not one of in depth or ongoing evaluation of a language problem. Other tests are purported by their authors to assess early language in depth but whether they do or not with young children is debatable. (Mechan, Jax and Jones, 1967; Arlt, 1977; Crabtree, 1963; Newcomer & Hammill, 1977).

An investigation into language components, as in the evaluation of a child's use of syntactic structures begins to examine language with more scrutiny. (Lee, 1969, 1971, Carrow, 1973, Manyuk, 1964). However, syntax is only one aspect of language and evaluation attempts are usually geared for children who are able to generate complete sentences. Auditory comprehension has also been used as a measure of language ability (Foste, 1974, Carrow, 1974). But in reality these attempts measure auditory abilities beyond peripheral hearing or comprehension of syntactic or morphological components of language devoid of situational context.

The approach that seems to give the broadest view of language functioning of young children with obvious language delay lies perhaps in the use of language sample analysis within the normal environment of the individual child. Two advantages to this approach are set forth by Kretschmer and Kretschmer (1979). First, since research with normal language development has used this approach, much normative data exists, Second, too often formalized testing situations present an unnatural performance estimate. Spontaneous utterances can represent how a young child actually uses language and speech within the context of his daily living. In addition to Kretschmer's language analysis procedure (1978) the language sample approach has been used by Lee, (1969, 1974); Tyack and Gottsleben, (1974); Hannah, (1974) and Bloom & Lahey, 1978).

A New Language Evaluation

The use of an analysis of a language sample forms the basis for one of two components of a language assessment package developed by this author and now in use with young children at the University of Virginia Speech and Hearing Center and Preschool Programs. Bare Essentials in Assessing Really Little Kids (BEAR) is an attempt to provide a viable assessment of the language functioning of a child with a language and speech level under the developmental age of 3 years, 6 months.

Description: The language sample analysis portion of BEAR may be used for initial evaluation purposes or for ongoing language examination. There are three analyses or "profile summaries" involved: use of syntactic and morphological rules, semantic/pragmatic relationships and phonetic and phonemic functioning. Each of these areas are represented on a summary form.

General Procedure: A spontaneous language sample is secured in a natural setting either in the child's home, the Center or Preschool classroom. Although it may be recorded on cassette tape it is also recorded in narrative by an observer. Four areas are included on the narrative sheet: the context setting, the stimulus, the observed child's vocal or verbal response (to be recorded in I.P.O.) and the observed child's related behavior. This information is then transcribed and analyzed according to the profile summaries.

Prequisite knowledge of examiner/observer: Use of this approach does warrant trained personnel familiar with transformational grammar, semantic rules and relationships, International Phonetic Alphabet and distinctive feature analysis. However, graduate students instructed in this approach are able to perform efficiently in approximately 35 hours of training that includes both theory and practice.

Limitations: This approach using language sample analysis is designed expressly for use with young children or children who are at very low levels of language use. The use of narrative provides a great deal of information but becomes impossible with children with normal language abilities of age four, five and older. The forms are designed with heavy emphasis on early utterances and are therefore not eclectic enough to include, for example, high level transformations used by children over age five.

Summary

Language sample analysis procedures appear to be the most promising way of examining the total language functioning of children. Although much has been done, using this approach, with normal preschool children and with children over age five, both normal and language delayed for various reasons, there is little available for the very young child or child with low language functioning. BEAR represents an attempt to fill this gap. Continued use will have to determine its value.

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